



# Exploring the Feminist Narratological Aspects within “The White Tiger” by Aravind Adiga

Aruna Kumari K<sup>1</sup>, Dr. N. Solomon Benny<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Andhra University, Andhra Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup>Head, Department of English, Andhra University, Andhra Pradesh, India

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**Abstract**— *Indian Writing in English (IWE) is in a new phase now, a phase that is free from the British or English influence in its writings. IWE, though it has its origins related to British literature, has progressed in its own way and established itself as a distinct literature with its unique features, setting it apart from the world of English literature. Indian writers with their distinct themes, styles, and narration contributed to the enrichment of Indian English literature and thereby raised the status of Indian English Literature (IEL). Aravind Adiga is one of the most prominent writers in Contemporary English Writing. His debut novel, “The White Tiger,” bagged the most prestigious “The Man Booker Prize” in 2008. The novel is known for its narrative, as it is appreciated by Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung as “A brilliant Debut...A marvelous narrator”. He received universal acclaim for his captivating storytelling. This artistic excellence can be the result of exemplary implication of narrative techniques. At a superficial understanding, The White Tiger appears to be primarily concerned with the social injustices and class struggles prevalent in India. This research paper analyzes the feminist narratological aspects of Aravind Adiga's novel, “The White Tiger.” Through the critical lens of feminism, the research study aims to understand the novel by applying the concepts introduced by Lanser's feminist narratology. Though the story is primarily about Balram and his journey from being a chauffeur to an entrepreneur, the various female characters he came across in his life and the way they are narrated give a different perspective to the total impression that one gets by reading the novel. The detailed analysis of the novel, with a focus on the portrayal of characters, particularly female characters, the exercise of power by the characters, and intersectionality, reveals a different perspective on contemporary Indian society. Through this examination, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's portrayal of gender and its implications for feminist discourse.*



**Keywords**— *Narratology, Feminist Narratology, The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga, Narrative Techniques.*

## CONTRIBUTION/ ORIGINALITY

This study is original in analysing the Aravind Adiga's novel “The White Tiger” from a totally new perspective, that is, a feminist narratological perspective. Unlike earlier studies, it examines feministic perspective of the author that facilitates a new kind of thought in exploring a novel irrespective of the gender of the author.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Writing in English is considered to be in a new phase, where it is free from the influence of British or English

writers. Earlier, it was like the offspring of British Literature in every sense, but now it can stand on its own in the canonical records as a distinct literary tradition. It has its flavour representing India in different aspects. Aravind Adiga is one of the most prominent writers in Contemporary English Writing. His debut novel, “The White Tiger,” bagged the most prestigious “The Man Booker Prize” in 2008. The novel is known for many aspects, among which the most unique aspect is its narrative. Adiga employs distinctive narrative styles, including interior monologue and discourse, in such a way that it transports the reader to

a different world. The paper attempts to explore the novel "The White Tiger" from a feminist narratological perspective.

The methodology of the study includes a close reading and critical analysis of the text, primary source, through the lens of feminist Narratology proposed by Lancer, as well as epistemology. This initial step is later followed by the discourse analysis to understand how language and narration are prominent in the construction of gender. This combination helps to explore even the subtle things related to the gender discourses. Employing an intersectional feminist narratology, the paper analyzes how gender, class, and cultural identity intersect within narrative elements such as voice, focalization, and temporality.

Even though Aravind Adiga has other works, the research mainly focuses on examining the novel "The White Tiger" through the Feminist Narratological aspect. Feminism as a movement was started to give equal rights to men and women. Feminist Narratology, as a concept, originated from Narratology, which has connections with French Formalism. The term Narratology was first coined and used by Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Grammaire du*

"*Décaméron*." He defined Narratology as the systematic study and analysis of narrative texts. Narrative is nothing but the way the story is given in a text. Toolan (2001) described narrative as "narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can learn."

Seymour Chatman, in his work 'Story and Discourse-Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film', suggests a basic skeleton for analysing the elements of a narrative. The above diagram is an extract from the book 'Story and Discourse'. In the book, it is stated that narrative is divided into two Prominent components: Story (content) and Discourse (Expression). Events that include actions and happenings, as well as existents such as characters, settings, and people, come under the category of a story. In contrast, Discourse deals with the structure of narrative transmission and manifestation. This narrative can be studied to understand both the form and substance of content and expression.

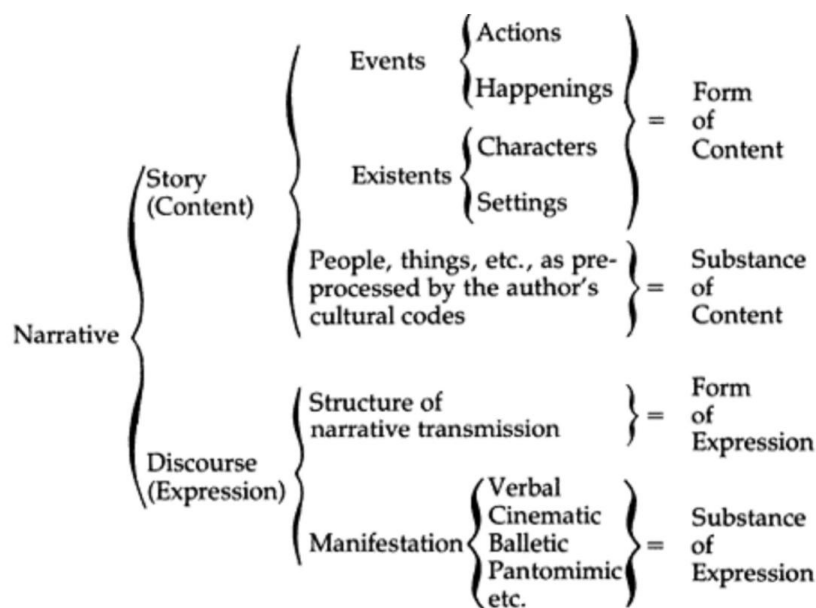


Fig. 1- Model of Narrative by Chatman

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the novel 'The White Tiger', the representation of women characters is limited, which reminds one of the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her book 'Can Subaltern Speak?' as marginalised people, particularly in the post-colonial society, are represented as "silent Victims" not allowing them to be involved in the main narrative. (1988, p. 45).

Todorov conceives narratology as a series of narratives that convey the content. The narratives can be analysed independently—their function as an independent form and their role and contribution to the main story. Todorov proposed a phenomenon in which all narratives contain equilibrium, disequilibrium, recognition, resolution, and a new equilibrium.

A lot of words have been introduced into the field of narratology by Gerard Genette in his book. '*Narrative Discourse: An Essay*'. Genette discussed five main aspects of narratology, which include: Order, Frequency, Duration, Voice, and Mood. Lanser S Susan, in her essay "Toward A Feminist Narratology," stated that bringing feminism and narratology together is like forcing the intersection of two lines drawn on different planes. Both these disciplines seem to be incompatible, but both might profitably join forces. The epistolary style is most commonly used by female writers. It is considered a female style. The reason behind this needs to be studied with a historical perspective. Women writers faced significant discrimination and restrictions on their writing. Virginia Woolf said that "Letters did not count": letters were private and did not disturb the male discursive hegemony.

Devina Rathore in her research article titled "Examining Women's Portrayal in "The White Tiger" through A Gendered Lens" analysed the feministic aspects and the role of women characters in the novel. It is stated that the "The crushing weight of tradition and cultural expectations stifles women of dreams."

Dr. G. Sharmely<sup>1</sup> & Mrs. A.S. Sivananthavalli<sup>2</sup> in their research article titled "Ambivalence and Power: The Complex Portrayal of Women in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger" stated that the women characters of the novel reflect the conventional values that views women as a secondary grade creature. However, a kind of dominant nature has also been represented at some instances which showcases the ambivalence and ambiguity in the characters. The authors opine that the writing can be the output of the experiences that the author have in the society.

Prof. Sonba Salve in the research article titled "The Narrative Techniques in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger" highlights the narrative techniques used by Aravind Adiga. The narrative was explained as an apt one to convey the content in the way the author wanted it to be conveyed. 'His narration oscillates between self-pity and grandiosity, as when he reflects, "I was looking for the key for years, but the door was always open," rationalizing his choices and moral compromises as necessary steps in a corrupt society. The usage of unrealistic, nonlinear, and dark humor makes the reader to question the authenticity of the explanations given by the narrator, which forms the base for the development of curiosity among readers.

The review of research till now highlights Aravind Adiga's work from the sociological, capitalistic, Post-colonial, Marxist, and Psycho analytical frame works. Not much analysis is done exploring the feminist narratological aspects. A little research has been done in analysing from this perspective, which constitutes the research gap. The

way in which the story of "The White Tiger" is narrated is unique, and the feminist narratological narrative can be clearly understood from his writing.

### Feminist Narratology

In a general sense, feminist narrative theory refers to the unique or distinct kind of narrative that female authors generally employ in their writing. However, the term "feminist" does not simply refer to female writers; it can also refer to anyone with a feminist inclination. Thus, this literary theory can be applied to any book, regardless of the writer's gender, as long as the ideology is portrayed. In view of this ideology, the research tries to focus on the feminist narratological aspects in the novel written by the male author, Aravind Adiga.

Gayatri Spivak's idea of feminist narratology is different from the traditional perspective. It states that it is not the plot or character that is most important; what is most crucial is who narrates the story and how power dynamics alter the story.

Based on the principles of both feminism and narratology, "The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga tells the story of Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager who rises to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. Through a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, Balram recounts his journey from being a servant to a wealthy landlord to committing murder and seizing his master's wealth to break free from the cycle of poverty and oppression.

### Portrayal of Female Characters:

The characterization of women in the novel provides the reader with a scenic representation of the patriarchal society that is prevalent in contemporary Indian society. The novel portrays a variety of female characters from different backgrounds, providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of the status of women at multiple levels. The characters range from below-middle-class and poor women in Balram's village to higher-class women like Pinky Madam. However, mostly these characters play a supporting part or act as symbols of patriarchal oppression. For example, Balram's village women are shown as marginalized individuals caught in cycles of poverty and exploitation. Despite their economic crisis, not all the women of the face the same crisis. Different characters were portrayed in different dimensions. Kusum is portrayed as a courageous and dominant character, and the other women in Balram's family are portrayed as vulnerable and fragile. Kusum, the grandmother of the protagonist, was introduced as a brave woman leading the funeral procession of the mother of Balram.

"Kusum, my granny, was leading the procession. Sly old Kusum!" (pg no 16).

But Pinky Madam represents upper-class women in India. Even though she is from the upper class, she also has to face suffering at her level in the form of restraints imposed by her family members, including her husband, and also from the expectations of society. For instance, in the earlier part of the novel, Mr. Ashok asked Balram some questions and mocked him based on his answers, and called him 'half-baked'. He even involved Pinky Madam also in this, and when she laughs, Ashok can't take it normally. This is only the tip of the iceberg, notifying the restrictions that are being faced by upper-class women.

"She giggled when she heard this, but *his* face, which I saw reflected in my rearview mirror, was serious." (Pg no-10)

A lot can be explored by analysing the power dynamics employed in the novel.

### **Power Dynamics and Gender:**

The most distinguishing aspect of the novel is how power dynamics are effectively employed to represent oppression at various levels within Indian society. Balram's conversations with the female characters in the novel reveal a lot about the status of women. Women, irrespective of their class or social strata they belong, are always expected to be subordinate to the corresponding male figure. This phenomenon is being observed in many instances in the novel. Pinky Madam belongs to the higher class or upper class and exercises her autonomy. However, this autonomy is only confined to some extent when it comes to certain family norms; she does not even have the autonomy to wear a dress of her own choice. Patriarchal attitude restricts the power of women. The other character, in contrast to Pinky Madam, is Kusum, Balram's grandmother. She belongs to a lower class but exercises greater control over family matters and over the family members. Her autonomy in ruling the family is evident in the voice of Balram. Adiga's representation highlights the complexity of characters and their interplay between power and gender.

### **Intersectionality of Gender, Class, and Caste:**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines intersectionality as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage." In the novel, Adiga subtly throws light on how other factors, such as class and caste, play a role in worsening the plight of women further. The problems faced by the women are aggravated by many additional factors, which are represented in the novel. The two prominent characters, Kusum and Pinky Madam, are confined to their gender limits by patriarchal autonomy in their families. Though Kusum has autonomy

in the family, she predominantly uses it to enhance the patriarchy in the family. She considers that it is for the benefit of the family. The yelling of the male members at the women of the family is a common phenomenon that is observed in both upper-class and lower-class families in the novel.

"One day, he lost his temper at home and began yelling at the women"(Pg No-27-28)

In another situation where Balram aims to gain credibility with his masters, he narrates an incident from his childhood regarding the kidnapping and killing of the master's son by the Naxals. The servant was shot dead immediately, and also the servant's brother and his wife, and his sister were horribly victimized. "That brother's wife was finished off by three men working together. A sister, still unmarried, was also finished off." (Pg No-67)

Adiga exposes how gender intersects with class and caste to replicate the existing power structures in society, relegating women to subordinate positions. While upper-class women like Pinky Madam enjoy certain privileges, they are also constrained by patriarchal expectations and societal norms. On the other hand, women from lower castes and marginalized communities face multiple forms of oppression, including economic exploitation and social marginalization. By examining how Adiga navigates these intersections within the narrative, we can gain insight into the complex realities faced by women across various social strata in India.

### **Narrative Techniques:**

Adiga uses various narrative techniques to continuously involve the reader in the text. The novel employs the form of a confessional letter addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, which offers a unique narrative framework that allows Balram to recount his story in his own voice. This provides insight into Balram's inner feelings. By employing this letter or epistolary format, the writer made the reader a part of Balram's world. The reader identifies with the landscape of the novel and can have firsthand experience while reading. Moreover, Adiga employs a non-linear narrative structure, which can be a symbolic representation of Balram's mental state, by intelligently intertwining past incidents and present incidents throughout the narration. Aravind Adiga employs an intradiegetic narration, where Balram, the protagonist of the novel, recounts his story in the first person through letters addressed to Chinese Entrepreneur Jiabao. The first-person narration is employed and occasionally uses interior monologue to convey the protagonist's mental agony. A Homodiegetic private discourse, but it serves the purpose of a public narrative.

### **Narrative Level and Voice**



| level         | Person                      | Public                      | Private                                           | Novel           |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Intradiegetic | Homodiegetic (first Person) | Meant for public readership | letters to another character in the novel(Jiabao) | The White Tiger |

### Narrative Structure of The White Tiger

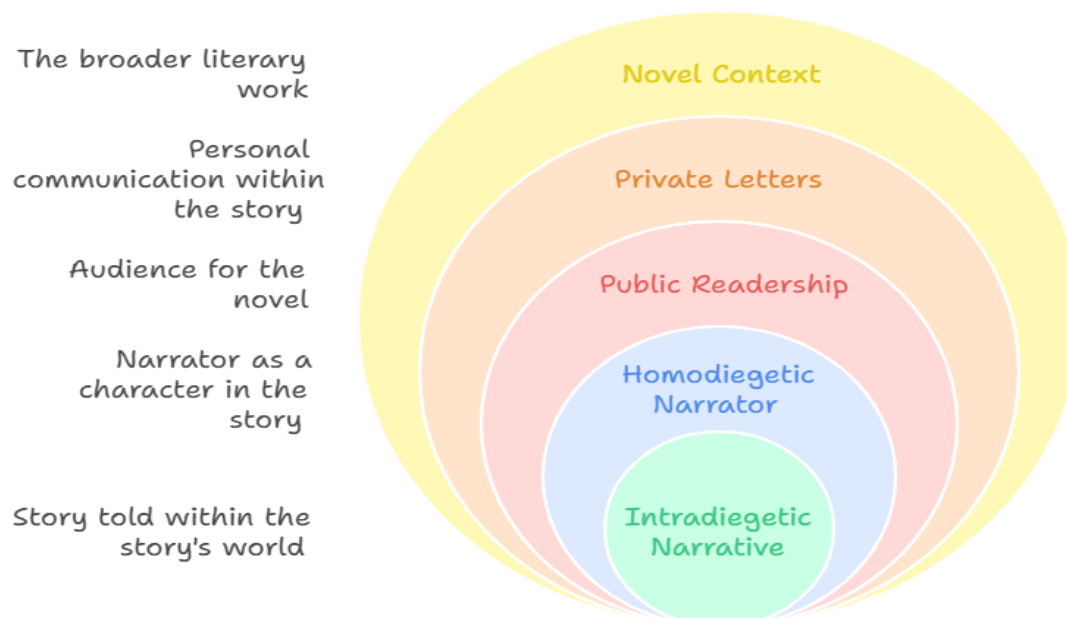


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The novel, 'The White Tiger', is written in an Epistolary format, which is often considered a feminist style of narration. Female writers used this epistolary model to convey their ideas amidst male censorship. This is the way women writers used to communicate to the public indirectly in the disguise of communicating with the addressee. Aravind Adiga, in his novel "The White Tiger", uses this technique to express explicitly the plight of the marginalized communities in India.

Susan S Lanser tried to identify whether there is any significant difference between the languages of women and men. Linguists thought that "Women's language or a discourse of the powerless" - a speech that is polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, and chatty, whereas men's answers are direct, rational, illustrating a sense of humor and strength.

Aravind Adiga uses voice carefully, so that even though no female character explicitly expresses their opinion or problems, the novel gives a clear picture of women of different classes in India and their quest for survival with self-respect.

#### Tropes:

The study of the novel from a feminist narratology perspective allows one to identify many tropes in the novel that directly and indirectly point out the plight of women.

#### Half Baked Indian

The term "half-baked Indian" was first used by Balram's owner, Ashok, in a conversation with Pinky Madam. This symbolism is used by the owner to mock his servant. However, the term "Half Baked Indian" probes the control of one over the other. Later it was used by Balram many times to refer to the condition of himself and other marginalized individuals. This highlights the notion of incomplete or compromised agency. The character of Balram was not happy and tried to challenge the notion. He proves himself in the latter part of the novel and reverses the trend, the plot. Though it is not mentioned or expressed directly in the novel, the term can best be suited to represent the situation of the majority of women in the country. The women also need to get an idea of the environment prevailing around them and should develop the potential to subvert the patriarchal dominance.

### Rooster Coop (The Great Indian Rooster Coop)

In the **Fifth Night** chapter of the novel "The White Tiger", the narrator said, "he pairs narrative techniques and Tropes can be studied under the feminist Narratology. "The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop." In the text, it is mainly used to represent the plight of the oppressed and marginalized communities of the country, but the other perspective is that it can be applied aptly to the women of the country. Women of the country are strong, talented, and intelligent in every way, but are trained to exist in perpetual servitude, and this is so strong that even if they receive the key of emancipation, they won't even think of using it and remain in the same coop.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" offers a rich and complex ground for feminist analysis, as it deals with the complexities of gender and power prevalent in contemporary India. The paper explores how male writers can also be studied under feminist narratology. It focuses on the representation of the female characters, power dynamics, and intersectionality of gender and the form, Narrative techniques, and tropes. These aspects are analysed to some extent, which paves the way for future research in the field of Feminist Narratology and various dimensions of it.

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